

Have Baptists lost their prophetic voice?

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Associated Baptist Press

Beginning with the ancient Christians martyred by the Roman Empire and running through Thomas Becket and to Dietrich Bonhoeffer and beyond, church leaders often have spoken truth courageously to the secular powers-that-be — regardless of the consequences.

But, in the months leading up to the increasingly unpopular Iraq war, did the United States' powerful conservative evangelical community step away from its responsibility to convey hard truths to the government? The answer, it seems, varies depending on one's views on the war—both past and present.

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“I think (conservative evangelicals) abdicated or relinquished their prophetic role from the beginning” of President Bush’s administration, said Adam Taylor, senior political director for [Sojourners/Call to Renewal](#), a progressive evangelical group that opposed the war from the start.

But Richard Land, the head of the Southern Baptist Convention’s public-

policy agency, said he thinks he and other conservative evangelicals who supported the war vocally were fulfilling their roles properly.

“I think that most of the evangelicals I think of—the majority that supported liberating Iraq and the minority who didn’t support liberating Iraq by military force—both spoke truth as they saw it to power,” he said. “And if they do that, they’re certainly speaking prophetically.”

Land led a group of five prominent evangelical leaders who, in the run-up to the war in the fall of 2002, signed an open letter declaring that Bush’s designs on Iraq satisfied the criteria of Christian just-war theory.

Saddam Hussein, Iraq’s then-dictator, “attacked his neighbors, used weapons of mass destruction against his own people, and harbored terrorists from the al-Qaeda terrorist network that attacked our nation so viciously and violently on Sept. 11, 2001,” the letter said.

Its signers included Prison Fellowship founder Chuck Colson. In a Dec. 2002 article for *Christianity Today* magazine, Colson argued that the classic definition of Christian just-war theory should be “stretched” to accommodate a new age in which terrorism and warfare are intertwined.

He concluded that “out of love of neighbor, then, Christians can and should support a preemptive strike” on Iraq to prevent Iraqi-based or Iraqi-funded attacks on the United States or its allies.

Charles Stanley, pastor of the First Baptist Church of Atlanta and a former Southern Baptist Convention president, even argued from the pulpit that war sometimes may be divinely justified.

“Throughout Scripture, there is evidence that God favors war for divine reasons and sometimes uses it to accomplish his will. He has also given governments and their citizens very specific responsibilities in regards to this matter,” Stanley said, in a sermon broadcast internationally on his

television program.

Polls at the time and later on showed white evangelical Christians were among the war's strongest supporters. But along with the rest of the public, evangelical support for involvement in Iraq has slipped considerably in polls taken over the last year.

Nonetheless, Land said he continues to believe the decision to attack was right at the time, even if the war itself has been mishandled.

"I still think that the liberation of Iraq was a noble cause, and it also was in the self-interest of our country and the other countries in the region," he said in a recent telephone interview. "And it certainly caused the fall of one of the more dastardly personages of the 20th century in Saddam Hussein."

But, with a sizable number of Americans now saying the war was a mistake for America, Sojourners' Taylor said the fact some of the evangelical community's most prominent leaders seemed to endorse Bush's agenda whole-heartedly makes the war a mistake for evangelicalism itself.

"In terms of the credibility of the evangelical voice and community, certainly it's had an impact," he said.

Evangelicalism has "become something of an appendage of the Republican Party" to many non-evangelical Americans, Taylor said.

"Even if we may disagree on how those Christian values should be applied to public-policy issues, we think we could agree ... on the importance of maintaining your prophetic integrity. And having an uncritical view of the war really compromised that prophetic integrity."

To Baptist historian Bill Leonard, there are precedents for Christian leaders being burned for cozying up to presidents. He noted many of the same conservative evangelicals who have defended the war previously criticized

progressive evangelical sociologist Tony Campolo for serving as one of President Clinton's spiritual confidants during his adultery-and-impeachment scandal.

"Earlier than that, Billy Graham himself had to come to terms with his close friendship with Richard Nixon after Watergate. And that was one of the cases where even Graham himself talked about his own sense of having been compromised," said Leonard, dean of Wake Forest University Divinity School.

But Leonard also noted disillusionment over the war has created a "teachable moment" among evangelicals and contributed to a growing discontent with the Religious Right among some younger evangelical leaders.

"There is evidence among certain ... emerging-church leaders who look over the fence, in a way, and who see where identification with one political party has taken some of their counterparts and their mentors and have pulled back from that," Leonard said.

"Because they see where this can take you when the government goes sour or when particular things go in directions that are religiously compromised or questionable."

Land, however, said such an understanding of evangelicalism's current dynamics assumes he and other leaders viewed Bush's desire to go to war uncritically—and the war itself has been an unmitigated disaster.

"I don't know any evangelicals personally who I had any suspicion" were mincing their words to Bush over the gravity of his decision to go to war, Land said. He noted he has long been an advocate of American military action to liberate the oppressed.

"You understand I'm someone who argued for (the first President) Bush ...

to intervene in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and one who argued for President Clinton to intervene in Kosovo and praised him when he did so," he said. "I'm a pretty strong advocate for intervening when we can to stop human-rights atrocities."

Land also noted that, whether he and other U.S. evangelical leaders wrongly paved the way to Iraq or not, the U.S. military is there now.

"To me, the discussion about whether or not we should have gone into Iraq militarily is an interesting discussion, ... but it's also an abstract one," he said.

"And the question is, now, what is the best way to win this war in a way that will benefit the Iraqi people and the people of the region and the United States?"